

# Projects of Note

## A New Life for an Old Mill

*Adaptive re-use turns a derelict factory into a residential community*

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Along the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic corridor, many of the industrial complexes that were once bastions of American innovation and commerce have become tarnished shells, relics of our country's industrial era. Now, seeking to find new lives for these structures, developers are re-adapting the buildings for use in commercial, residential, and mixed-use projects.

An example of this type of adaptive re-use is The Mill at Little Falls, which sits on the Passaic River in Little Falls, N.J., on a major dam and picturesque waterfalls. The site was once the industrial complex for the Beattie Carpet Mill, which used the falls as its power source. The Beattie family owned the mill for more than a century, with the textile makers fabricating uniforms for Union soldiers during the Civil War. When the company fell on hard times, it shut its doors and its multiple buildings languished and deteriorated.

### New development, new life

During the mid-1980s, architect Barry Poskanzer, AIA, principal and partner of Poskanzer Skott Architects, worked with a developer that had purchased the property to devise a design scheme that would retain the architectural integrity of the old mills, while adapting it for development of a new residential community. Poskanzer said the site had been renovated several times between 1850 and 1950, requiring the architects to work with a variety of building styles and architectural details. For example, he said, the building media



Picture taken in 1984: the Beattie Textile Mill dates back to the mid-19th century. The Beattie family abandoned it, and it fell into disrepair.

included wood, stone, brick, concrete, and any combination of those materials and more. To accommodate the vernacular of each mill, the architect used a color palette, building materials, and scale complementary to the original structures.

"The Mill at Little Falls shows



Poskanzer Skott Architects, Ridgewood, N.J., renovated the abandoned mill, creating 330 apartments, a parking garage, a recreational facility, and open spaces. The falls and the Passaic River, which once generated the textile factory's power, now serve as a picturesque backdrop for the residential community. Photos by Alan Schindler.

the potential of adaptive re-use at its best," Poskanzer said. The mills are on a 13.4-acre suburban tract between two heavily traveled streets, the dam, and the falls. Poskanzer and his firm implemented a plan that included 220,000 square feet of renovations and 145,000 square feet of new construction, resulting in 330 units of housing, a new parking garage, a recreation building, a riverside park, and other open space. They knocked down buildings that were unusable, which created the open space, and "fixed up the rotten parts," renovating the remainder of the mills.

"Every corner of every building was a unique new problem," Poskanzer said of the diversity of the mills in the first phase of the project. As a result, there are few floor plans that are the same as the one next door. By contrast, the final component of the project, a \$3.5 million gut renovation of an industrial building into a nine-story, multifamily residential housing complex, has about eight apartment plans for the entire building.

### Community support

The Kramer Group, Clifton, N.J., now owns the site. But, as a result of the 1987–1988 recession and other economic difficulties on the part of the developers, it changed hands several times. It is only in the last few years that the final building—which Poskanzer has



**Picture taken in 1984: the Beattie Textile Mill dates back to the mid-19th century. The Beattie family abandoned it, and it fell into disrepair.**

redesigned from the original site plan—is being built. The original cost of the project was \$30 million.

"The community itself was thrilled that the derelict mill was going to be fixed," Poskanzer said, adding that the town had also passed new and accommodating zoning rules that encouraged this type of develop-

ment. Unlike other developments on which he has worked, Poskanzer said the fact that this property was not bound by official preservation regulations gave him greater freedom to develop the property in a way that was architecturally sound, but that made economic sense.

"This is a textbook example of how underused sites and abandoned buildings can be restored as valuable real estate and tax assets, provide solutions for the scarcity of multi-unit housing, and add new vitality to a depressed community," Poskanzer said.